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ABSTRACT

Richard Wright's literary work emphasizes a contrast between black women and white women. Although both are "givers" to black boys, the nature of what they give is different. The black woman gives physical life, feeds it, and protects it at the expense of spiritual or creative vitality. Her goal is to survive bodily, to breathe, to have enough strength to endure the physical deprivations of being black. The black woman mothers a people dead of spirit but alive with physical capability; she does this through counsel, religion, example, and, if these fail, physical torture. Young black girls learn this pattern from older black girls and the conditioning becomes a "mothering" of humans lacking in personal initiative and creative drive. In contrast to the black women in Wright's works, the white women are unconcerned with the physical survival of black boys. Instead, white women coax black boys out of the mothering syndrome and into the "mommism" syndrome, enticing Wright's black boy characters toward a life of the spirit at the expense of physical death. With this contrast between the physical and the spiritual, Wright points out the evils of racist, classist societies that fragment the self and force black men into unfair, unnecessary choices between physical life and spiritual meaning. (RL)

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RICHARD WRIGHT'S THEMATIC TREATMENT OF WOMEN IN UNCLE TOM'S CHILDREN, BLACK BOY, AND NATIVE SON

A Speech For The

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Born in Mississippi in 1908, Richard Wright became one of the most notable American protest writers before his death at 52 in Paris. Yet, in America today he is considered and remembered primarily as a sort of black Communist who astonished the country with powerful books about blacks in a racist society. So disturbing were Wright's novels that critics, black and white, were often confused as to just what to say about them. On one hand they praised his hard hitting realism while at times they shouted insults at what they considered revolutionary propaganda written from a black male's point-of-view. Others claimed that the creative imagination is colorless and even androgenous, and that the images or symbols for creative concepts only take on color or sex when it is is filtered through the individual writer's thought. In other words, literature is metaphorical, and abstractions seek out their personifications and concreteness according to the personal bias in thought - not imagination. Then the exact reasons why Richard Wright chose women as images or symbols for particular socio-psychological conditions, and why he assigned certain aspects to certain racial types can not be completely explained. What is clear, however, is that women in Wright's works are definitely treated in significant ways, deserving of our attention and scrutiny. It is important, nevertheless, to acknowledge the fact that fictive women are not actual women in the real world. Therefore, the issue of Richard Wright's treatment of women must not be one of politics. It is an issue of literary analysis. Just <u>how</u> the women function to assist the

writer in his thematic schemes is my concern. Whether he was fair, complete or nice toward the females characters is a concern I leave to women libbers or feminists.

As a social critic, Wright used characters in his fiction and autobiographical fiction to explore the depth of socio-psychological damage done to America's skull - the American psyche - by race and class prejudice. Contrary to what appears to be his lack of attention to them, Wright used women as important keys to unlock the chambers of this skull and reveal the ugliness there. Accordingly, Wright's women in his American trilogy - Uncle Tom's Children (1938), Black Boy (1945), and Native Son (1940) - fall into two simple but major categories: Black and White.

To each of these categories Wright has attached special and opposing qualities. But the primary quality that dominates and distinguishes between these women is the quality of "giver." In Wright's work black and white women "give" something to the black community, especially to the black boy. However, let me assure you that this seemingly common characteristic is not an indication that these women are to be compared because the nature of the black woman's gift and the white woman's gift is extremely different, and the consequence of each gift is disturbingly at odds.

The black woman is described in Wright's trilogy as either a polluted root that sprang out of the diseased soil

of American racism and classism or as a direct branch out of that root. No, Wright does not blame the root or the limb for he portrays too well the effect of prejudice, fear, guilt, and racism on the woman who became the strongest force on the black child's rearing. Despite his explanation or his indignation about the situation, Wright does not attempt to cover up the fact that racism and classism harmed people, and that being damaged themselves, the mothers of black Americans tended to transmit this damage down from one generation of blacks to the next. Wright undoubtedly says through his treatment of black women that since they are polluted roots of the race, the fruit they bear and nourish will carry the scars of this damage throughout their life.

To Wright the black woman has been psychologically programmed to believe certain things and to behave in certain ways conducive to the institution of Jim Crow. She has been developed by racists to which she has had some exposure to be an unknowing agent assisting in the dehumanization of black people. For instance, Wright's women appear to enjoy a pseudo sense of freedom as she is allowed to make some wage from menial jobs performed for white racists. This exposure to the quirks of her bosses merged with her false sense of freedom to condition her to help create a people with an inferior sense of self. More sinister was that she participated in conditioning these same people to accept a deplorable existence as befitting them. One the other hand, the black adult males in Wright's works,

unable to find work, constantly emasculated and humiliated verbally and physically, were busy taking flight, dropping out, or getting drunk. The super strong, super religious and indestructible black woman was left saddled with the responsibility of caring for the young by herself. She was overwhelmingly protective of the physical body and life of her charges. Her gift to the children was a fanatical concern for the physical self. So concerned was Wright's women with physical survival that she taught her brood how to stay alive through example, counsel, and punishment. She felt her children must learn how to become subservient enough, docile enough, Uncle Tomish enough to make it through the day without being lynched. Black wome knew the rules of Jim Crowism, and escaping into a warped view of Calvanism, tney preached that a better life was something after death, and joining the church was a far safer gesture for a black child than his attempts in the actual world to win human rights to aspire spiritually in a hostile world. Yes, the black woman in Wright's works was more than a matriarchal figure heading the household. She was a conditioning force, stifling the will of her boys while making them fearful for their lives. The black woman's gift, then, to the black community was the impulse to live in a physical sense by exorcizing the will to aspire to the spiritual height of true humans. I designate the black woman's gift to the black child as "mothering" since the connotation suggests bending, pruning, and shaping the being without regards to the aspiration of the human spirit to transcend societal limitations

to all that is simply mundane.

In Uncle Tom's Children, a collection of short stories in which Wright attempts to show a social and psychological progression on the part of black men and women, there is no story that presents a black woman who understands the true nature of the black man's quest for spiritual height. She does understand and even assists in the male's effort to save his physical life, but aspiration beyond the limits society has placed on his humanity is never in her mind. Indeed, it would appear that Wright doubted that the black woman possibly possessed a mind by which she could understand. Surely Wright is not attacking real women in real society, but he is blasting the urge he associates with the black woman - that urge to belittle the self to insure physical existence.

"Big Boy Leaves Home," is a typical example of this. Wright says, even through the Eden-like setting of this story, that in the world of possibility when the black child dares to reach out, he is not only reprimanded by the hostile forces of racism in the world, but he is, too, slapped on the wrist by black women for their arrogance of being seen in an act of spiritual transcendence. The lone black woman in this story, simply identified as "Ma" is ready to punish Big Boy for being "seen" naked in the world of men where his sexual member was to be assumed non-existent. Big Boy had been where he should not have been. He should have, according to Ma waited for heaven after death and save his hide by avoiding being found off his limited truff seeking human experience. At one point in the story, the

story, the black men gather for the purpose of designing a plan to save Big Boy. They kneel in a feverish prayer to a white God. They appear as bundling crazed little boys though they are the elders. Ma has done her work on them because Ma knew how to save a black man's life; Ma knows how to buckle down to Jim Crowism. Big Boy was big enough to survive her, but his survival was due to just that: He was a Big boy.

In "Down By the Riverside," Brother Mann, rowing against the tide of human anguish to save his family from being swallowed up in a flood, has to fight, too, against the constant detrimental nagging of his mother who reprimands him for stealing a boat. Despite his efforts to achieve, to row his family to safety, his pregnant wife, dead weight in the boat, dies in childbirth, bearing nothing but heaviness and emptiness for the future.

The third story in the collection,"Long Black Song," features a male protagonist, Silas, whose entire aspiration to obtain something of value for his family is irresponsibly frustrated and wrecked by his wife who allows herself to be sexually seduced by a white peddler. Because of his vengence on white racists, Silas is burned alive in his own house by a fire that consumes all that he has worked for while Sarah, the wife stands on a hill learning how dagerous it is to the body to unleash the spirit. One trembles when one thinks about what Sarah will teach her child.

Essentially, the women in "Fire and Cloud," the fourth

story in Uncle Tom's Children are treated in the same manner. Dan Taylor, the preacher and leader in the black community, is caught between two choices: to be docile and beg in vain for food from the bosses of the town and in the process insure his and his son's physical life or to rise up and strive with Communists to affect social reform. Typical of Wright, the author shows Taylor's wife frightened and insistant that that he chooses the former. At the same time the "thin black woman" in the story (a fitting image of the condition of the black community) constantly whimpers that she is hungry - a hunger that reminds Taylor of his failure as a man. There is an irony here: The black woman in Wright's work emasculates yet humiliates the black man by reminding him of his inadequacies-inadequacies she heself has helped to pepetuate.

"Bright and Morning Star," a later addition to the original manuscript, at first reading is both a reinteration of "Fire and Cloud" but with a woman as center character, and as a story in which Wright wished to give credit to the countless heroic black women who died for equality of races and the abolition of classism. But Sue, the protagonist does not qualify as a champion of justice afterall. Sue dies to save her black Communist people and practically despised whites who were in the same Party. What might seem to be a radical social conscious or even existential death of a great black woman turns out to be the death of a black nationlist. Sue's real concern was for what she could do to save the physical lives of black people - not for what she could do to save the Party which was to represent

unbiased colorless human spiritual growth.

All the black women in Black Boy functioned as evidence that the most brutal instruments for the preservation of Jim Crowism were black women. So bent these women were on physical survival of the race that they tried, consciously or not, to beat every ounce of spiritual aspiration out of the black child. Not one black woman described in any significant degree cared for education or any of those intangible things that transform brutes into men and women. They forced into the minds of their children a confused religion that promised heaven, stifled any attempts at creativity and tortured the children until they became so docile and buffoonish that the faintest spark of humanity in them was snuffed out completely. Even the image of Ella Wright, Wright's own mother,was presented as a paralysis that slowly infested and immobilized black people. It is interesting, indeed, that Wright attached the deadening of human aspiration and will to his own sick mother. Granny, Aunt Addie, and even his favorite aunt, Aunt Maggie emerged in Black Boy as dispicable agents aiding and abetting racists in the castration of black life.

In Native Son, written five years earlier than Black Boy, Wright even then presented a host of black women whose sole function in the novel was to show the narrowness and barrenness of black life. Mrs. Thomas - the mother of Toms - after brow-beating Bigger Thomas for his shiftlessness, begs like a puppy dog before the white world to spare the physical life of her son.

Bessie is treated as a hindrance and detriment to Bigger, and Vera, Bigger's sister, at every chance insults his efforts to be heroic. Consequently, the black boys who listens to the black woman develops into shuffling zombies, capable in taking orders but never able to give any.

While the black woman in Wright's works is treated as agents of spiritual death, the white woman is treated as agents of spiritual health. In Wright's novels, the white woman gives to the black child, too. But unconcerned about physical longevity, her gift is the call to adventure - the aspiration to reach beyond the limits of race and class to grasp what there is that glitters in human existence. This glitter is the forbidden fruit, herself, the carrot of life, the spiritual exaltation that for a black boy most likely will end in death of the physical self. To distinguish the white woman's gift from that of the black woman, I use the term "mommism."

In Uncle Tom's Children, the white woman is the girl standing at the edge of the pond where Big Boy and his buddies are swimming naked. She wiggles snake-like through the forest towards them, calling them from innocence into experience. Through her being Big Boy is made man and can never again recapture the naivete he had before seeing her. The girl is the glitter of the American quest, off limits and unobtainable to blacks. And should a black see her his physical life hangs on a thread. Such is the price the black man pays for the spiritual quest as Prometheus paid for celestral fire. Bobo, Big Boy's pal is caught and is

burned in the flames of his own creative fire. Mrs. Heartfield, the flaming hair white woman in "Down By the Riverside," calls to Brother Mann in like manner. It is because he aspired to save her that he was killed by rifle fire. Even the name "Heartfield" - Heart Feel - suggests the heart, the senual, the coming to life which is transcended above the mere physical. In this story the only time the tone of sexuality, for instance, occurred was when Mrs. Heartfield was spotted. Before her, Brother Mann's world was gray - like death, but with Mrs. Heartfield color stirred and the world came alive.

Such an attitude around the image of the white woman is further developed in Native Son. Wright wrote in "How Bigger Was Born" that the way Biggers are created in American life is that (1) give a man potential, (2) strip him of a religion that promises reward for deprivation in some other world, (3) dangle the glitter of society about his face, and (4) tell him because of who he is he can not have that glitter. This is precisely what happens in Native Son. Bigger has potential, but he is confined in Chicago just as much as King Kong was caged in the exibition cell in New York. Bigger does not believe in God or a heaven after death to his black mother's dismay. He has been fed, however, on a steady diet of ways to fight a physical battle. Bigger can beat the life out of anyone in the ghetto because he is King Rat himself. Now comes Mary Dalton, the young, beautiful white untouchable virgin Mary of America's psyche. She and replicas of her are dangled

before the rat's eyes, and Bigger is told by law, custom, and practice that the worst taboo he can ever break is to aspire to Mary's height. Mary is more than a sexy lady - the Gay Lady - in the movie Bigger watched. She is the embodiment of the glitter at the end of the human quest for spiritual exaltation. Other free men may seek her out, but Bigger is not to have her. No wonder, then, does Bigger feel a kind of grand accomplishment when he accidentally kills her and burns her body in the furnace. He has "had" Mary when he cut off this maiden's head. He is now the one who has created his own fire and in it he has burned white womanhood. He has consumed the forbidden fruit and is now, as Adam and Eve, experienced, initiated into manhood and alive - spiritually on fire! His physical death will be swift. But he has lived spiritually for the first time in his life.

Wright's essential and most profound message throughout Uncle Tom's Children, Black Boy and Native Son is that there is a contrast to be made between the black woman and the white woman. For sure, both women are givers to black boys, but the nature of what they give is different. The black woman gives physical life, feeds it and protects it at the expense of spiritual or creative vitality. Her concept of survival is to survive bodily, to breathe, to have enough strength of body to endure the physical deprivations of being black. She gives to the black boy, not the human will or spirit of determination to assert one's humanity. Instead spirit to her is interpreted as being a religion that promises an affirmation of self in

some other world -- a mystical and mythical heaven after life. There is no time, no place for dreams or urges to exceed one's societal limitations. Hers is a giving of a substance to accept those limitations without endangering one's physical life. To this end the black woman mothers a people dead of spirit but alive with physical capabilities. She does this through counsel, religion, example, and if these fail, she resorts to physical torture - the ultimate teaching method when the preoccupation is with the physical. The young black girls learn this pattern from the older black girls and the conditioning becomes a "mothering" of a vst wasteland of humans lacking in personal initiative and creative drive. Racists and classists are pleased because they find that the black woman with her mothering is in reality their ally, and to help facilitate this process, they give the black woman a kind of sense of power, even pseudo respect, for she is, indeed, assisting in the scheme of white or upper class superiority. Thus, black boys remain boys forever, frustrated in their attempts to become men.

In Wright's works, the white woman gives, too, but the nature of her gift is unlike the physical mothering associated with the black woman. In Wright's works, the white woman is unconcerned with physical survival of black boys. Instead, she coaxes them out of the mothering syndrome to the syndrome of mommism. The white woman character entices Wright's boys towards life of the spirit at the expense of physical death. She holds up to the black boy the glitter that awaits creative search, self development and spiritual quest. In essence,

she says, "reach out beyond the limitations if you would have what other free men would have." The white woman in Wright's works are all Eden serpents in one degree or another. And if the black woman say to remain an innocent child, obedient to rules that stunt creative urges for the sake of breath, the white woman and what she symbolizes calls out to say, "Taste of that which is forbidden and live as gods though you die quickly as humans."

Seduced through the enticement to educate oneself, to reach out, to feed the spiritual impulse, the black boy falls out of ignorance and into knowledge. He becomes that god, or better, he becomes a man. Wright's works imply that racists nor classists can not tolerate such an upset of the status quo and in an effort to purge society of this new arrogance, usually rally together to stamp it out. The black boy's physical life is then destroyed because of the birth of his spirit.

A question then arises: Which does Wright favor - mothering or mommism? In his own life, there is no doubt that Wright favored mommism. Wright took flight from the black woman and gravitated towards women who were white. He found in these women the sophistication, intelligence, and the kind of femininity he felt would lift him from the mire of black suffocation and paralysis, according to Michel Fabre's, The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright. Even his choice in wives further confirms this preference. But what about his personas, his blay boys in his American trilogy? From all

indications Wright appears to say that the whole person needs both physical life and spiritual meaning. Without a combination of the two, man is fragmented, living dangerously against the tide as Brother Mann in "Down By the Riverside." Perhaps this is just the argument that Wright had against a racist or classist society. Racism and classism fragment the self, and man is left to make his own existential decision as to which of these fragments best affirms the individual self.